



Islam

SESSION 4

Where did Islam originate? What do Muslims believe? What similarities and differences are there between Christianity and Islam? How can Christians and Muslims best relate to one another?

Introduction

In this final session, we seek further to understand Islam, this time in terms of the relationships between Christians and Muslims, both past and present. After a look at the experiences of centuries past, we will discuss similarities and differences between the two faiths and then look into some resources upon which both religions might depend in seeking interfaith understanding and cooperation.

A Troubled History

One might think, upon learning in Session 1 how the Ethiopian Christians welcomed the Muslims seeking refuge from persecution in Mecca, that the two faiths, Islam and Christianity, had every chance for existing peaceably together. Another story from the beginnings of Islam tells of how Muhammad invited a delegation of Christian visitors to pray at the mosque in Medina. And later in Damascus, a church building was divided into a Christian half and a Muslim half.

Unfortunately, Muslims and Christians did not remain in such good relations. Early on, they became identified with political empires. The Christian powers of Byzantium and Europe faced an expanding Islamic dominion, and for centuries, relations between the two religions were affected by a contest for military, political, and economic power. At first, the Muslims gained the ascendancy (see Session 3), and in the midst of the Islamic triumph, European Christians rallied in the eleventh century to launch the wars of the Crusades trying to recover control of the Holy Land, which had been taken over by the Muslims. These wars lasted for nearly two centuries. In the fifteenth century, Byzantium was conquered by the Turks, and then followed the

long, gradual decline of Islamic power, to be supplanted by revitalized Christian nations of Europe. Today, war, politics, and economic forces continue to stand in the way of good relations between Muslims and Christians. The agelong conflicts between politically aligned faith communities were



further intensified by differences in religion. Each side saw the other as an obstacle to its desired economic and political power, and each side also tried to discredit the other's moral and theological position. In places where Muslims and Christians lived and worked together as fellow citizens, political conflict was absent, but the ties of their respective faith communities hindered them from reaching out in search of interfaith understanding and cooperation.

So, whether separated by political alignment reinforced by religious differences or united in building a life within the same country but divided by religion, Christians and Muslims developed antagonism toward one another. The Muslims from their side felt that they understood Christianity since the Koran has quite a bit to say about Jesus and the Christians. But the Muslims' interpretation of Christianity was completely unacceptable to Christians. In the next section, "Similarities and Differences," we will take up some of the points of contention. Muslims considered that Christians were unfaithful to the message revealed

to and by Jesus and that they had tampered with their Scriptures as they quarreled among themselves regarding the proper understanding of who Jesus was. This is not to say that the Koran itself is anti-Christian in tone. It speaks of the followers of Christ with respect but also with a note of reproach.

Christians did not know what to make of Islam at first. Some thought of it as an Arabian Christian heresy. Then, as citizens in the Islamic countries working closely with the Muslims, they began, through their theologians and philosophers, to analyze Islamic beliefs and to interpret them in terms of Christian beliefs. The era of polemics ensued, involving detailed attacks against Islam as a religious system and as a way of life. Muslims, in turn, took up the challenge and launched polemical attacks against what they saw as Christian weaknesses in moral behavior and in belief. Outside the Islamic countries, European Christians contributed their share of attacks against the integrity of Islam. There was little sign of a willingness from either side to discuss their differences peaceably. The result was a mutual standoff that persisted until modern times. Indicative of how Muslim-Christian controversy has been largely a dialogue of the deaf is the fact that, every generation or so, new books and discussions have come forth from both sides that simply repeat the same arguments that had been advanced for centuries. Even today in the U.S., a number of books are being published purporting to expose what they call the “dark” and “sinister” side of Islam. Likewise, Muslim apologists abound in many lands, critiquing the Christian way.

Similarities and Differences

Both faiths believe in a God-centered life. Obviously, the way Muslims work out this belief in the unity of life under God is different from the way Christians do. However, before looking into some of those differences, we observe that from the worldview uniting us, there flows a stream of concepts and language that reveal remarkable similarities. The two communities talk about their faith using such expressions as angels, heaven, hell, resurrection, faith, good deeds, grace, sin, repentance, forgiveness, scriptures, prophets, and creation. God is understood by both faiths as all-powerful, all-wise, all-merciful, just, true, compassionate, loving, eternal, unchanging, etc. Equally similar are such concepts as prayer, fasting,

celebration, charity, self-denial, and submission to the divine will. Virtues are held in common, such as truth, purity, honesty, integrity, hospitality, generosity, perseverance, humility, patience, loyalty, and courage. This is not to say that these similarities indicate total uniformity. Similar words and concepts are often interpreted differently even to the point, at times, of marking divergences between the two faiths. For example, there is the figure of Jesus, central to Christianity and highly significant to Muslims. In the Koran, one reads that Jesus was born of the virgin Mary, that he lived a sinless life, became a prophet of God, performed miracles, was named “a word from God” and “a sign from God,” and received the title of Messiah, or Anointed One. Then, in what seems, at least to Christians, a strange contradiction to the positive appreciation of Jesus, the Koran denies that he is the Son of God and dismisses the divine Trinity as unthinkable. Further, the Koran acknowledges that, at the end of Jesus’ ministry, his enemies sought to destroy him, but that they only thought that they killed him. He did not die but was taken up to be with God.

A further difference between the two religions is closely related to the denial of Jesus’ crucifixion. If the Koranic Jesus did not die upon the cross, then Christians may wonder what Muslims believe about salvation, since the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus are central to the church’s understanding of salvation. Islam, too, teaches a doctrine of salvation. According to it, human beings may be delivered from sin by a merciful God who responds in forgiveness and spiritual empowerment to those who repent of their wrongdoings and live in faith according to the commandments of God as revealed in the Koran. To Muslims, however, the saving mercy of God simply flows from the mystery of the divine nature. They make no attempt to explain the “how” of salvation. Christians, of course, believe that in Christ’s offering of himself on the cross, we catch a glimpse of divine love entering into the human condition and saving the world.

The thoughtful Christian will do well to ponder these profound differences quietly and respectfully. Is there any way to know how they arose in the first place? And what can we do about them? The troubled history at which we are looking shows that we, Muslims and Christians, have not dealt with our differences very well. In fact,

we have scarcely even benefited from our similarities. Could it be that much of our trouble religiously is due to colossal misunderstandings between us? To what degree can these be cleared up? Is there an irreducible core of belief in the one religion that must stand forever over against a core of belief in the other? If that is the case, then we must simply agree to disagree.

Scriptural and Doctrinal Bases in Islam and Christianity for Mutual Respect

Because Islam came after Christianity, it is easier for Muslims than for Christians to find a scriptural and doctrinal basis for good relations between the two faiths. The Koran describes the place of Christianity in God's plan for humanity. The verse quoted in Session 1 (3:84) states that the message of Jesus belongs in the series of revelations given by God to humankind throughout history.

To the question of why there are numerous religions in the world, the Koran has this explanation:

To each one [of the religious communities] we have given a law and a way. If God had willed he would have made all of you one community. But that which you have been given you so that he might test you thereby. Outdo one another, then, in good deeds, turning, all of you, toward God your goal. Finally he will let you know how you differed from each other.

Chapter 5, "The Table," v. 48

Everyone should be free to believe or not believe as they please.

Say to those who do not believe: I do not worship that which you worship, Nor do you worship that which I worship. For you your religion and for me mine.

Chapter 109, "The Unbelievers," vv. 1–3, 6

Beyond mere tolerance there is this strong positive appreciation of the Christians, as well as others:

Those who believe [in the Koran], and those who are Jews, Christians and Sabaeans—who believe in God and in the day of judgment and live righteously—they have their reward from their Lord, and they shall know neither fear nor grief.

Chapter 2, "The Cow," v. 62

It will be remembered that the basic doctrine of Islam is that of the unity of God. From this belief, Muslims developed the idea of the unity of all that exists. This means that every authentic religion issues from the fundamental truth of unity. Christianity is, in its original revelation, an expression of the divine unity.

These doctrines and Koran verses provide resources for friendly relations with Christians. However, the Koran, Islamic theology, and law contain counter elements of debate with Christians and reproach toward them as well as a call to accept Islam as the final message from God to humanity. These would seem to weaken the positive approach to Muslim–Christian relations, but in the interest of peace, mutual understanding and even cooperation are possible.

We turn now to the situation of Christians. They cannot find a place for Islam in God's plan, or at least they cannot agree on what that place is. Theologians from all branches of the church disagree. Speaking generally, some deny any validity to Islam. Others believe that Islam is a way of salvation parallel to Christianity. The trouble with the first position is that it does not take into account the many similarities that exist between the two religions. The second position does not take seriously enough the differences between our faiths. Other Christians, recognizing that the Bible is silent on the subject, simply withhold judgment and leave the matter in God's hands.

The Christian doctrine of creation provides an opening toward better relations with Muslims. Because they, like us, are created in the image of God, we are united with them in the bonds of common humanity. Our life in community with other human beings, in this case, Muslims, is a gift from God the creator, which it is our privilege to cultivate by faithful living.

Then there is the way Jesus lived. He was a faithful Jew, but he met and related to people outside the normal ties of his religious community. He went to lepers (Luke 17:11–19), foreigners (Matt. 8:5), women (Matt. 15:21–28, also a foreigner), and social outcasts (Luke 15:1–2), thus showing those who follow him today the way to surprising and demanding experiences of human relationships.

When the infant church was beginning to break out of the limitations of its Jewish matrix, the apostle Peter learned

that even a Roman soldier could have faith. Peter cried out, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34–35). Christians trying to relate to Muslims in worthy ways should trust in the God of overflowing goodness, who is entirely free and wholly wise, the final judge of all things.

Modern Experiences of Muslim-Christian Cooperation

Since the Second World War, Christians and Muslims have increasingly been getting together in the interest of interfaith cooperation. A great impetus for such effort was the declaration by the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church in 1964 (see sidebar).

This official statement of recognition and respect for Islam was truly epoch-making. After its proclamation, other churches issued statements showing friendliness to Muslims and expressing a desire to cooperate with them. The era of Muslim-Christian dialogue was born.

Level One

On an international level, scholars from the two faiths have met in Tunisia, Libya, Italy, Spain, Lebanon, Jordan, and other countries. On these occasions, which continue today, research is shared to cast light on the history of relations between the two religions, to analyze the present world situation, and to plan for increasing contacts and cooperation between the two dialogue partners. These scholarly exchanges are the first level of Christian-Muslim activity.

Level Two

At the next level, we leave the international scene and limit ourselves to what is happening in the U.S. Here we note the many times when churches and mosques cosponsor meetings. Included in these are interfaith services of celebration, prayers for world peace, discussions of social problems, theological and scriptural questions, ongoing committees for organizing regular interfaith gatherings, and social times for sharing information about each other's faith tradition. Out of these meetings have emerged on occasion structured programs for interfaith action, especially in large cities, to improve community life.

1964 DECLARATION BY THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

Upon the Muslims, too, the Church looks with esteem. They adore one God, living and enduring, merciful and powerful, creator of the heavens and the earth and speaker to men. They strive to submit wholeheartedly even to his inscrutable decrees, just as did Abraham, with whom the Islamic faith is pleased to associate itself. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere him as prophet. They also honor Mary, his virgin mother; at times they call on her, too, with devotion. In addition, they await the day of judgment when God will give each man his due, after raising him up. Consequently, they prize the moral life and give worship to God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting. Although in the course of the centuries many quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Muslims, this Council urges all to forget the past and to strive sincerely for mutual understanding. On behalf of all mankind, let them make common cause of safeguarding and fostering social justice, moral values, peace and freedom.

Walter M. Abbott, The Documents of Vatican II (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), 663

Level Three

Finally, there is the experience of individual Christians and Muslims in cooperation as they build a life together in our country. Americans are increasingly aware of Muslim neighbors, colleagues, school friends of their children, companions in recreation, professionals, and businesspeople. There is less need at this level for formal organization of dialogue or cooperation. What is needed is an increased awareness of the religious and cultural distinctiveness of the other person. When dialogue partners at this level are open to learn from each other and are ready, then they will reap the joy of deep interfaith fellowship.

About the Writer

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